

Columbia Downtown

Summary of Focus Group Minutes and Email

Issued: November 22, 2006

DPZ's SUMMATION OF FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS' FEEDBACK

Introduction

The Columbia Downtown Focus Group (FG) is a community-based sounding board formed by the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) to provide feedback about the on-going development of the Columbia Downtown Master Plan (*CDMP*). For further background information about the Focus Group Meetings and the Master Plan, please visit <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/Community/ColumbiaMasterPlanCharrette.htm>.

The Focus Group asked that DPZ prepare a summary of their discussions of major topics. DPZ listened to FG discussions during meetings and prepared minutes of those meetings. Minutes were then submitted to FG for their review and input.

In preparing this document, DPZ reviewed FG meeting minutes and email correspondence from FG members. This document summarizes comments from individuals in the FG, and it does not represent a consensus reached by the FG. It does not include comments by the general public. Although a few FG members expressed a desire that public comments be included, other FG members did not agree. Based on the initial request by the FG, DPZ did not add public comments to this summation document. Public comments are summarized in FG Minutes.

Also, this summary does not address all topics considered by the FG. Topics discussed by the FG prior to the February 27, 2006 *CDMP preliminary draft*, which were adequately addressed in that draft are not included. Discussions on logistics, process and schedule are also not included.

As requested by the FG members, DPZ synthesized feedback and, where possible, has indicated how FG comments may be incorporated into the upcoming revision to the *CDMP*. As part of this feedback process, the FG reviewed and commented on this document during the FG Meeting of September 26, 2006.

As with the *Preliminary Draft CDMP*, FG chose neither to approve nor disapprove this summation document; however, a clear majority of FG members desired that a document be created as a record.

Feedback on the Draft Vision Plan and Overarching Issues

A central concern of members has been transforming the original Rouse vision into a relevant, coherent vision for the future. Individual FG members have offered a wide variety of visions and priorities based on what they believe Rouse may have envisioned for Columbia today and into the 21st Century.

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Four overarching issues emerged repeatedly during discussions: maintaining the original social values of Columbia; the breadth of the Vision Plan in the *CDMP*; the *urban* vs. *suburban* character of Downtown; and, the desire for a unique sense of place in Downtown, as expressed by its architectural style, the types of buildings and public spaces that will be built.

First, **social values** are viewed by some to be the touchstone for any new vision, if the *CDMP* is to be true to the original founding vision for Columbia. Affordable housing, inclusiveness, diversity and community are the primary social values of Columbia. These social values, as expressed by FG members, are summarized in the section below.

DPZ Response: In the *CDMP revised draft*, DPZ will include an expanded discussion of social values as well as reiterating the historical FOUR VALUES, as espoused by Jim Rouse at Columbia's founding.

Second, some members desire a **Master Plan** to include a detailed and specific development plan for all properties in the Downtown prior to the adoption of the Master Plan, zoning amendments and submission of any plan or rezoning request by the private sector to the County, while other members would prefer a *big picture* visioning document that sets goals and a general agenda for development but leaves flexibility to property owners to be creative and to respond to the market in developing more specific proposals.

DPZ Response: DPZ supports the *big picture* visioning document idea; however, DPZ will attempt to clarify what should be required versus where flexibility should be allowed for creative responses, when DPZ is developing the *CDMP revised draft*.

Third, underlying much of the FG's discussion about creating more **vibrancy** in Downtown is whether redevelopment in Downtown should be relatively more *urban* or *suburban* in character. The FG is clearly divided over how much urbanity to espouse, and much of the debate about residential density, building height and traffic flow is affected by this fundamental split. FG members have agreed to forego any attempt to reach consensus, providing feedback only as individuals. They suggest that their differing opinions reflect a similar split in the larger community that supports more activities and transit but is divided over levels of development.

DPZ Response: DPZ endorses a more vibrant, urban environment in order to support a pedestrian-friendly and lively Columbia Downtown, which Charrette participants desired. DPZ does not support the continued suburban, automotive dominance of the Downtown, which is not pedestrian friendly.

Fourth, regarding **architectural style**, a member expressed the essence of this issue by characterizing Columbia as *Yesterday's City of the Future*. FG discussions raise a number of issues. Should Columbia include the visions of place and community found in the *neo-traditionalist* architecture of The New Urbanism? Or should Columbia maintain the *forward-looking* modernist architectural approach that originated in the late 1960's? Some believe that *forward-looking* architecture can be incorporated into a *new-urbanist* planning framework. Architectural issues are more fully summarized under the major topic of Physical Development.

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Also, design is only partly about architectural style; the FG has expressed a desire that Columbia develop and maintain a unique sense of place that enhances and protects Columbia's unique assets such as Lake Kittamaqundi, Symphony Woods and some early Frank Gehry buildings, while adding new buildings and spaces that are special, compatible and synergistic.

DPZ Response: A Design Advisory Panel in conjunction with design guidelines are recommended by DPZ as tools to ensure the development of a unique sense of place.

Feedback on Social Values

Affordable Housing

Provide a full spectrum of housing for all people is integral to the new Columbia Downtown. Affordable housing receives a ringing and unanimous endorsement by the FG, since the FG sees economic diversity as one way of continuing the original vision.

DPZ Response: Italicized language above will be included in the upcoming *CDMP revised draft*. Proposed requirements for affordable housing will be developed after the County-wide Affordable Housing Task Force report is available.

Civic, Cultural and Community Facilities

School: Many members believe that a school site reservation is needed to ensure that adequate land is available to meet future needs. If children are residing in Downtown, then some members find it desirable that they be able to walk to a nearby elementary school. Additionally, an urban model of a more compact, multi-use educational facility should be considered in Downtown.

DPZ Response: DPZ and HCPSS have already identified a reservation site in The Crescent. DPZ agrees a more compact, urban prototype should be considered in future if HCPSS decides a school is needed.

Fire: Some members value the existing fire station as an early Frank Gehry building, while also recognizing that it has been radically modified. Most members agree that the Dept of Fire & Rescue is the appropriate agency to determine what fire services are needed and to negotiate for a new or redeveloped facility located on the existing site or on another site in or near Downtown.

DPZ Response: Capital funding for the future relocation or redevelopment of the Banneker Fire Station is already contained in Howard County's Capital Improvements Plan (CIP). The *CDMP revised draft* will show a potential site in The Crescent.

Library: Parking for the Central Library is identified as very problematic. The *preliminary draft* Vision Plan suggests a future library with structured parking below the buildings, but this is also problematic; a shuttle bus is needed to expand access to the Library for library patrons. The Library Master Plan update process will determine whether to expand on site or relocate.

DPZ Response: Howard County Library will study these issues in its amended *Facilities Assessment and Master Plan 2005-2030*, which the Library plans to complete in 2010.

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Arts & Cultural: Some members reminded the group that the original promise by Jim Rouse of an active arts community in Downtown is yet to be fulfilled. Incubator spaces for artists, ground-floor gallery spaces, underwriting for art in public places and a variety of low-cost rental units for related cultural ventures should be made available in Columbia Downtown; however, funding sources have not been identified and these members are concerned that this cannot happen without dedicated funds.

Additional comments by other members include that the Exhibit Building, new office, retail, and even residential buildings could house art exhibits. Also, important existing art venues like Howard Community College and Toby's Dinner Theatre also must be recognized and promoted in Columbia; and, finally, strategies to encourage developers to construct or support cultural amenities, recreational and community gathering spaces are needed. The Columbia Association as well as commercial entities could also provide for arts and cultural spaces, and such spaces could be freestanding or part of multi-story structures.

DPZ Response: The *CDMP revised draft* will include expanded text about the role of the arts in a vibrant Downtown and will encourage private, public and nonprofit groups to find ways to enhance the arts. Although desirable, securing committed funds for this issue will require collaboration

Feedback on Transportation

Transit

Members want the need for frequent, reliable and permanent transit at the local, County and regional levels to be addressed immediately. A Travel Demand Management (TDM) requirement similar to that utilized at Maple Lawn may be desirable. Also, reserving rights-of-way for light rail, rapid bus transit and a possible Columbia-based or County-based local, internal shuttle should be investigated. Identifying funding and a plausible right-of-way alignment are not addressed in the *CDMP preliminary draft* and should be included.

DPZ Response: Options for a Downtown shuttle and expanded bus service linking Downtown to Columbia Villages and elsewhere in the County will be assessed as part of the next Transit Development Plan (TDP). Study of regional transit options will be pursued with the State DOT and BMC via the next update of the Baltimore Regional Transportation Plan.

Pedestrians

Members living in or near Downtown are especially cognizant that pedestrian safety in a pleasurable, destination-filled environment for walkers, bicyclists and other users of personal transportation is a major challenge in Columbia Downtown. Additionally, many members cite crosswalks and ADA accessible streetscapes as critical for a vibrant downtown environment. Members feel that providing pedestrian safety **now** is vital. Including a pedestrian circulation section in future versions of the *CDMP* may be one approach to address this crucial issue.

DPZ Response: Standards for pedestrian circulation will be included in the Design Guidelines. The *CDMP* proposes a hierarchy of pedestrian links and areas. DPW and

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DPZ are collaborating to begin short-term improvements. Long-term improvements will be addressed by the developer(s) in the future via their submittal of a proposed Downtown Development Plan (DDP) for County Council review and by the County in its Pedestrian Master Plan and in future capital projects.

Traffic

Broad concern was expressed over traffic impacts to surrounding Villages. Another concern is *through traffic* where drivers are using Downtown roadways solely for access to US 29; however, it is also recognized that most of these drivers are residents of Columbia, who have limited access to the regional road system other than US 29. Diverting traffic around the Downtown and Columbia entirely is seen as a desired solution, but few options exist to implement this idea; additionally, some would like to investigate a new overpass across US 29 to increase connectivity to the Village of Oakland Mills. Many FG members stress that access to Downtown in general via all modes is vital to continuing success for Columbia as a whole; and, the lack of east-west connections is an existing and critical shortcoming in Columbia.

DPZ Response: DPW will be contracting with an engineering consultant to conduct a feasibility study of South Entrance Road as a third interchange on US 29 and the potential for a road connection over MD 29 to Village of Oakland Mills; however, based on the recommendation of traffic consultant Walter Kulash at the July 12 FG Meeting, it may be better to fund transit improvements rather than a new overpass.

Most FG members would agree that the Glatting-Jackson *Traffic Analysis* reveals that the preliminary draft Vision Plan is workable at some level, but it would be difficult to accommodate traffic flow at the maximum development program. This *Traffic Analysis* was conservative and did not include transit, widening the MD 29 Bridge at 175, or a new interchange that many members want for Downtown but will require future study to determine viability. Some members desire a comprehensive traffic study of all possible options prior to completing the *CDMP*.

DPZ Response: DPZ proposed a *Draft Recommendations for Program and Heights* with reductions in proposed office space to 3,000,000 square feet in response to *Traffic Analysis*, which shows the chief problem is the bottleneck created by PM peak office traffic exiting from Downtown. DPW will engage an engineering consultant to evaluate potential for South Entrance to be a full interchange.

Also, some members believe that the FG and *CDMP* must address large-scale, visionary issues rather than concentrating on detailed discussions of traffic loading at specific intersections, or preserving trees along existing roadway segments, or the workability of proposed three-way or off-set (*dog-leg*) intersections.

DPZ Response: DPZ will recommend a large-scale vision in the *CDMP revised draft*. Property owners will be required to prepare a comprehensive traffic study subsequent to the application for a specific development proposal. DPZ will consider requesting an independent traffic consultant to review the comprehensive traffic study submitted by property owners.

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Finally, some members report that although the Department of Public Works (DPW) presentation began to address their issues such as overflow traffic onto local roads through and around Columbia, these members are still concerned about future traffic. Also, although DPW assured the FG that there is currently existing, excess roadway capacity on Cedar Lane, Harper's Farm Road, Route 108 and other roads, some members are still concerned that new cut-through traffic and future growth in background traffic may cause unforeseen traffic problems. A group of these members are advocating for a comprehensive traffic study to be prepared in advance of the development of any future vision or Vision Plan for Downtown. These FG members also strongly advocate for studies of the three choke points identified by Walter Kulash.

DPZ Response: A comprehensive traffic study is premature in the absence of an actual development proposal with specific density, use mix and development phasing. DPZ does not anticipate developing a detailed, specific, build-out plan for the entire Downtown, simply to conduct a hypothetical traffic study. A comprehensive traffic study will be required of the property owner(s) who submit an application for rezoning and redevelopment.

Feedback on Future Physical Development

Building Height

Concern over maximum building height as expressed at the Charrette is also a concern of many of the FG. Some members are concerned that the 275-foot height of the Plaza could potentially overwhelm the existing Downtown; however, since the Plaza Residences project was already in process long before the charrette and has been approved, there are members who express concern that halting the project could dampen future interest by other developers in Downtown redevelopment. A few members welcome buildings as tall as 20 stories.

Some members are also concerned that prolonging the FG process would allow further development under the current rules, especially since current rules contain no height restrictions whatsoever. These members would prefer expediting the process so that some kind of restriction is put in place, as opposed to continuing with no height limitations. Maximum building height and the implications of prolonging the FG's review continues to be a major concern.

DPZ Response: DPZ's 3D model analyzed the Illustrative Plan and the proposed development program from the Charrette. DPZ concludes that only 12 stories are needed to accommodate the proposed development program with reduction from 5.2 to 3.0 million square feet of office based on Glatting-Jackson's *Traffic Analysis*. Flexible maximum height of 6 stories in certain areas of special concern (Lakefront Core, along Governor Warfield Parkway and in Warfield Triangle) and 14 stories elsewhere with options for bonuses would allow for a range of heights, so that buildings would not all be 12 stories or 14 stories. The development program could be accommodated in different ways: fewer but taller buildings with amenity space between them or more and lower buildings with less amenity space (with the same amount of program). Please refer to DPZ's *Draft Recommendations for Program and Heights* for further detail.

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Development Program

The maximum number of proposed residential units, the timing of future infrastructure, and the provision of promised amenities to accompany residential development are of great concern. Infrastructure and amenities should either precede or be concurrent with new residential units.

DPZ Response: DPZ agrees infrastructure and amenities to be provided concurrently with development. DPZ is proposing 5,500 residential units, hotel rooms and office uses in Downtown, which is the maximum level of proposed units from the Charrette, in order to provide for a more vibrant Downtown area needed to support cultural and civic uses, entertainment, and restaurants to animate people, spaces and transit. The *CDMP* is a 30-year plan that is proposing a small percentage of the County's 30-year growth.

Green Building

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards should be required in Downtown. Then, Columbia could be re-branded as a green community and thereby continue to enjoy its status as a world-class model for planned development. Many members stress that green technology must be mandatory for new building in Downtown.

DPZ Response: DPZ will pursue research and public outreach related to Green Buildings as a Countywide goal and include language throughout the *CDMP revised draft* to strongly encourage the use of green technology in Downtown.

Open Space, Parks and Plazas

Exactly what comprises open space is important to the FG. If buildings, hardscape plazas and potential recreational facilities, such as a skating rink, were to be considered open space, will this cause damage to the existing, naturalistic open space in Downtown and throughout Columbia? Some members are hesitant to label urban spaces as open space, because of possible unintended consequences of redefining the open space in Columbia Downtown.

Many members support the concept that all open space in Downtown should be coordinated and provide substantial linkages to existing networks of paths and open spaces throughout Columbia. Some members believe that private open space provided in individual projects should not be counted towards the public open space requirement. One member suggested that open spaces should include public restrooms. Other members feel that transit stops, promenades, the maintenance and public use of civic spaces, criteria for the design of open space, and the nature of urban amenity spaces are not adequately addressed in the *CDMP preliminary draft*.

DPZ Response: Distinctions between urban amenity space and open space will be better defined and expanded design guidelines will be included in the *CDMP revised draft*. There will be separate requirements for both.

Architectural Design

Many members emphasize that architecture should be distinct and special to Columbia, and there was concern expressed that many of the charrette images were not specific to Columbia. Ground level-facades, roofs and surface parking must have mandatory standards for design. Building materials should not be specified, while public art should be required. Many members agree that

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green technology should be a required element in architectural standards. Also, although some images in the design guidelines need to be revisited, this component of the *CDMP* should be retained to provide guidance towards the goal of achieving good designs for the Downtown.

Members contend that individually architectural review boards and architectural design standards have their shortcomings. Some members suggested that both could be used together to mutually provide guidance for more thoughtful and careful designs. Some of the architects on the FG feel that professional advice, general standards and social values are needed instead of an overly specific set of restrictions that try and legislate appearance or require a certain architectural style. Although some FG members support a County-appointed Design Advisory Panel (DAP), a few members strongly object. Supporters disagree on whether the Panel should comprise only design professionals (as is the case in Baltimore City) or also include citizen members.

Also, public streets need to be as carefully designed as private buildings. Street design should reflect the hierarchy and use of the street. Also, DPZ is asked to clarify what is a signature building and who defines where and how often these buildings may occur.

Lastly, some FG members are unsure about DAP but strongly agree that whatever overall process is selected for final project approval, this process must retain the pre-submission review at the Village Board level *and* the opportunity for public input before the Planning Board.

DPZ Response: DPZ supports maintaining both pre-submission review and review by the Town Center Village Board. DPZ anticipates that architectural review would be part of a proposed legislative package scheduled to be presented to the new County Council in 2007 for projects along Route 1, in the Route 40 Corridor, infill senior housing projects requiring a conditional use, as well as for projects to be proposed in Columbia Downtown. DPZ supports architectural review to ensure a high-quality, context-sensitive design for this special location.

Parking Garages

Concerns of some members over inadequate parking at the Mall, the Plaza project and other uses in Downtown are counterbalanced by concerns of other members that an over-supply of parking is inimical to a pedestrian-friendly environment. A park-once environment may be the solution, and a parking management organization would be helpful in coordinating parking for big events. Many FG members recommend that peripheral parking garages and frequent shuttle service be investigated, while cautioning to be careful of shared parking. Also, existing Merriweather Post Pavilion parking must be replaced or provided for elsewhere within Downtown before construction is permitted to proceed at The Crescent. Some members suggest that parking garages should not be visible at street level and could be provided below grade.

DPZ Response: Downtown should include a range of parking options. Design guidelines will address how to make these attractive. An expanded consideration of shared and peripheral parking garage locations will be included in the *CDMP revised draft*.

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Lakefront Alternative Design

Some members feel strongly that the Teacher's Building with Clyde's and the Tomato Palace restaurants be preserved and not removed to create a pedestrian and visual link between the Lakefront and Mall as suggested at the final Charrette presentation on Saturday, October 22, 2005. Although most members recognize that the original design intent to create surprise and interior views of Lake Kittamaqundi is important, these members contend that the Lakefront Plaza and nearby environs are the most important asset and the heart of Columbia.

DPZ Response: Both options for Teacher's Building were included in the February 27th *CDMP preliminary draft* and will be included in the *CDMP revised draft*. *Note:* Clyde's and the Tomato Palace would first have to be relocated to other Lakefront locations before anything could be done to the Teacher's Building.

Wincopin Street

FG members were divided regarding the three options presented by DPZ (As-Is, Charrette Vision, Modified Vision). Most members desire to preserve the Grove, the Hug statue and surrounding buildings and environs, while some express willingness to see some changes. Some members believe that multiple options should be presented so future design teams, or a future DAP, or property owners or others may decide which option is best to implement. Many members express that retaining the pedestrian-only character of the space is desired.

DPZ Response: As with the Lakefront, DPZ will include all options presented to FG.

Feedback on Implementation Tools

Collaborative Effort

Some FG members hold strongly that Howard County, the Columbia Association (CA) and various Downtown property owners need to work together in order to create a well-designed, well-functioning and integrated environment. Additionally, property owners need to collaborate in the creation and submission of an overall, unified zoning proposal to the Howard County Council for its review and approval. Without coordination, no vision can be achieved. County-required cooperation among all property owners is viewed as being critical by many FG members.

A few members request that construction of crosswalks and streetscape infrastructure be provided in advance of new development, and these members feel that this is only possible by a partnership of Howard County Government, CA and General Growth Properties, Inc. (GGP).

DPZ Response: DPZ is committed to encouraging coordinated design and zoning application by all Downtown owners. DPZ will also promote further discussion regarding the creation of a Downtown Partnership for ongoing maintenance and programming of shared facilities and spaces. Additionally, DPW and DPZ are collaborating to begin short-term pedestrian improvements now.

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Phasing and Staging

Some members want the *CDMP* to establish multiple thresholds for development in each district to ensure that development cannot proceed until infrastructure improvements and amenities are complete for each phase. These phases are envisioned as distinct portions of development to be provided in each district. Some believe that the Warfield Triangle, LPP/Lakefront, Corporate Boulevard and The Mall should be substantially complete prior to approval of any private development at The Crescent.

FG members stress that required roadway improvements and other necessary infrastructure (schools, water and sewer) should be tied to development approvals, so that needed infrastructure is built concurrently with or prior to development and all necessary public facilities are available upon the completion of each private project.

Members report that mixing of uses both vertically and horizontally is desired; and, this must be addressed in the staging. A single use over an entire block should be prohibited; and, architecture should permit changes in use. However, some members feel that flexibility is needed to allow the marketplace to function properly.

Finally, some members desire proposed phasing to require an early *critical mass* of development, while others advocate additional studies including review of the secondary planning area (community college and hospital) and multiple, preliminary traffic studies of all possible options.

DPZ Response: Existing safeguards in APF regulations and the proposed Downtown zoning and monitoring process are adequate to address development and infrastructure phasing. Staging (balancing the mix of uses) must be included in proposed zoning case and approved by the County Council.

Zoning

Some members believe that GGP should be required to collaborate with the other private property owners in Downtown to submit a well-coordinated, joint application for redevelopment. Not all members embrace this idea. A sub-group also expressed concern in writing that the current proposal would allow GGP to develop a proposal independently of the other property owners within Downtown.

Some members have expressed concern over the lack of specificity in submission requirements and a reduced number of public hearings proposed in the DPZ Draft Zoning Approaches. Finally, other issues regarding the Mall District need to be resolved. Some members advocate requiring windows and façades in the future to integrate the Mall with other districts. Also, a realistic approach to Mall parking during parking lot redevelopment is crucial.

DPZ Response: Zoning regulations are still in formulation and will reflect FG feedback.

Monitoring Indices

FG members expressed the need for specific monitoring indices as part of the Plan. These should include transportation (traffic and transit), affordable housing, pedestrian improvements, mixing and balancing of uses, civic and cultural amenities, and the pace of development in each district.

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DPZ Reply: A list of specific monitoring indices and a process for their review, monitoring and reporting will be included in the *CDMP revised draft*.

Feedback on Documentation of the FG Input Process

Some FG members are preparing a preamble for inclusion with documentation of the FG feedback, which will be in addition to this Summation prepared by DPZ.

DPZ Response: DPZ will prepare a *CDMP revised draft* in response to the feedback from the FG as well as further research. This *CDMP revised draft* will be presented to the FG first for additional feedback. CDMP will also be presented at a public meeting prior to submittal to the Planning Board for recommendations and to the County Council.

Finally, although many members desire to maintain the charrette vision, some members call for a new and complete re-working of the Vision Plan document and the Illustrative Plan drawings to reflect ideas and changes proposed during the FG meetings.

DPZ Response: DPZ will deliberate on how to both convey the FG feedback and convey the original charrette vision, as part of the formulation of a *CDMP revised draft*.

DPZ Addition: DPZ will review the CDMP issues with the new County Executive to determine the process and the schedule for building consensus and completing the CDMP.

Acknowledgements

DPZ would like to offer our sincerest thanks to all of the FG members and to the many attendees who dedicated so much of their time to provide feedback to DPZ as we work together to develop a new vision and master plan for the future of Columbia Downtown.

Focus Group

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* An asterisk indicates a member of the Public who represented a FG Member at one or more meetings